Kayaking Across the Adriatic Sea

I am sitting at my computer after taking my friend Ray Fusco to the airport for his return flight to the USA, and reflecting on my last two weeks. Ray and I recently attempted to be the first seakayakers to cross the Adriatic Sea unsupported. My mind has returned to a comment made last night at Ray's farewell dinner by the captivating Professor Joško Božanić, Head of Maritime Heritage at Split University. He repeated a proverb, whose original Spanish escapes me, but in English can be paraphrased as, "There are three types of men - those that are living, those that have died and those that navigate". As I understand it he means that there are those that meander through life, those for whom life means absolutely nothing and those that truly try to experience life to the fullest.

But can't a person or a life contain all three? In that sense, I think that the Professor's comment is truly apt in regard our recent attempt to cross the Sea.

We lived; we navigated; and we also died.

Long distance sea kayaking can be monotonous; it is not a sport of extreme excitement. During our expedition, we paddled the still waters between the inner islands, where the short fetch keeps the seas slight and the paddling becomes just a hard slog.

But with seakayaking, what you live for are the days when you paddle in the big seas. The adrenaline pumps as the wind and waves rise. It's just you, your kayak and your skill, no one else to rely on; seakayakers are self-sufficient. Ray and I felt this excitement as we battled the Force 5/6 seas, with rain and hail, during our exhausting 12-hour crossing from the port of Komiža to Palagruža Island.

However, what had originally started as an expedition to promote Dalmatia and life on the Adriatic Sea quickly developed into a bureaucratical nightmare, causing the death within us of hope for the near future of Croatian serious water-based adventure sports.

Wednesday 15th March 2006

After finally receiving a compromised permission to leave the evening before, Ray and I put our kayaks in the water at Matejuška at 6.15am. Matejuška we felt was appropriate place to begin given that our expedition was celebration of Dalmatian fishermen. The seas were slight and the breeze was negligible in marked contrast to the 90-knot *bura*, which had been blowing several days before. A small crowd waved goodbye and ferry captains blew their horns in support as we headed towards the open sea.

After an uneventful three hours we needed to stretch our legs and have something to eat so we alighted at the lighthouse next to Milna on Brač Island. Instantly we were warmly received by the master and his friends and soon discovered ourselves holding half liters of bevanda; half red wine, half water. They mentioned to us that on the morning's radio Stipe Božić, a Split native who has twice summated Everest, had been debating Boris Matošić, the Split Harbor Master, regarding us. Stipe had made the point that no exploration would have occurred throughout the world's history if the attitude of the Split Harbor Master was allowed to prevail.

The afternoon's paddle took us to the Pakleni Islands, where we setup camp for the night. We had completed 40 kilometers in our first day.

The seakayaking ideal is that all equipment for touring is carried within the boats. Our two boats contained a tent, sleeping bags, clothes, cooking equipment, safety equipment, including medical kits, flares, EPIRBs and radios, as well as food and water for 6 days. Each fully loaded kayak was close to 70 kilograms. Though we were ordered by the Split Harbor Master to have a 'support' boat, we told the skipper, Nigel Turnbull, and the crew that we didn't need them and that they were not to offer us any help. We still wanted to do the expedition 'unsupported'.

Thursday 16th March 2006

After waking at 8am on Thursday morning, we proceeded in moderate easterly breezes from the Pakleni Islands towards the northern coast of Vis Island. A late lunch was taken on a beautiful little beach unfortunately spoilt by a large amount of plastic garbage on the beach, which seems is a problem that occurs on many Dalmatian beaches.

Only a short distance remained to complete the 30-kilometer journey to Komiža.

Komiža was for many years the center of the Adriatic Sea fishing industry. Its dialect is related to 'franca lingua', the old Mediterranean fishermen's language. It had up to 7 sardine factories at one time preparing the fleet's catch for markets all over the world. Fishermen from Komiža started the fishing industries in Australia, South America and on the West Coast of the United States. And, for over 400 years it was the beginning point for one of the longest regattas in the world.

Five-man crews on up to 100 falkušas would race 75 kilometers to Palagruža Island, a dot of rock in the middle of the sea, just to secure the best fish-drying position on the small Palagružian beach. Ray and I planned to follow in their wakes. We wanted to be the first men to complete the course under human-power only in nearly 70 years.

Friday 17th March 2006

The sun was still below the horizon when Ray and I dropped our kaykas into the water to begin the journey to Palagruža. We had calculated we would require 12 hours to reach the island but we needed as much time as possible to make sure we were not trying to land on the rocky islet in the dark.

The sea slopped around under the kayaks as we made our way out of Komiža Bay. We could only see the waves within the small circle of light cast by our running lights. It was difficult to judge what was coming.

Just as the sun rose behind the storm clouds on the horizon we rounded the point and set our course towards Palagruža. The wind initially was in our face from the southeast. The seas were already high at this early hour. We ran down along the

troughs in the waves nervously watching over our left shoulders for the extra large waves that would arrive in sets.

Slowly we edged away from Vis and Biševo Islands. As we did the wind backed around towards the east and finally in a hail storm the northwesterly *tramontana* hit us. Our pace suddenly jumped from less than 4 kilometers per hour to over 8 as we surfed down the 2.5-meter waves. The Sea became a washing machine as competing swells criss-crossed.

To rest, eat and relieve ourselves Ray and I would raft the kayaks together. Two or more seakayaks attached in this manner are almost impossible to capsize. The Inuit, who invented seakayaking, would spend large amounts of time at sea, surviving extreme storms in this manner.

Sixteen kilometers from Palagruža the island appeared on the horizon through the haze. There it sat for the next 4 hours teasing us as we slowly bounced towards it.

We rounded the razor-like island to land on the protected southwestern beach, where we discovered several fishermen hiding from the weather, safely on their moorings. We struggled from our boats and collapsed exhausted on the beach, with aching muscles and blistered hands, after a day of continuous exertion. Our core muscles were fatigued from having to adjust the kayaks to the swells coming from multiple directions. Not only was the crossing physically exhausting but mentally as well. We had to be constantly alert for breaking waves that could have knocked us over into the chilly water.

Palagruža Island was a stunning location to finish such a grueling paddle. The lighthouse is perched atop limestone cliffs surrounded by lush flowering vegetation, which is home to thousands of birds.

There was no comfortable bed waiting for us either. We setup our camp on the rocky beach before being fortunate

enough to be invited to join the lighthouse keeper and his family for dinner.

Saturday 18th March 2006

Allowing ourselves the reward of an extra hours sleep, Ray and I packed our camp and left the beach at 9am. The weather was perfect. The *tramontana* was still blowing but not as strongly and the swells had dropped significantly.

We had already decided that we were going to make our way to Italy, only 50 kilometers away. The permission to go only to Palagruža we had received from the Split Harbor Master, written as it was by petty bureaucrats, we felt was worthless. Nothing was going to stop us from completing our original plan to cross the Adriatic Sea.

The petty bureaucrats had other ideas. As we drew near the Croatian border, 18 kilometers from Palagruža, on our way to Vieste, the Tamara, our 'unsupportive' support boat, drew alongside. Within sight of the Italian coast, Nigel told us that the Split Harbour Master had threatened to arrest us all if we proceeded and had sent the police vessel from Vis Island to intercept us. After debating the pros and cons of proceeding Ray and I decided that since others would be adversely affected by our decision if we continued we should abandon our plans to run across the border, and we put our kayaks on the yacht.

Nigel set a course for Hvar Town, where we arrived at midnight.

Sunday 19th March 2006

After a coffee in the main square of Hvar we sailed towards Split. Constant radio checks were made by the Split authorities to confirm that we had not changed our minds and head back towards Italy.

At midday we docked in front of the Harbor Office, unloaded the kayaks and equipment from the support boat and went home.

It was an unfortunate end to our adventure.

Ray and I had been excited at the prospect of having been the first to complete such an undertaking. We have extensive training and had excellent equipment. To have the decision whether to proceed or not made for us and by people with a self-confessed ignorance of seakayaking was a disappointment. An opportunity to bring good publicity to Dalmatia had ended with reports in foreign press that we had been stopped by old-fashioned Eastern European authoritarianism. Officials such as Radovan Linić and Edo Šarunić, from Marine Search and Rescue in Rijeka, Boris Matošić, the Split Harbor Master and Željko Jerkov, Head of the Split City Council are happy to stop highly skilled, young people from reaching their full potential.

A glaring difference in attitudes between the west and the east became obvious to us as we setup for the journey. When we told Americans or Australians what we intended to do we received nothing but positive support especially from those who had undertaken much more difficult expeditions than what we had planned, but almost everyone in Croatia, even young people who should be taking full advantage of life, could only think of reasons for this project not to proceed. I think it is a sad reflection on how little the mind-set has changed within Croatia since the old days.

A genuine fear of the sea may be responsible for this attitude. But it would be far healthier to have respect for the sea rather than fear. Fear leads to contempt. Contempt for the Adriatic Sea can be seen in the amount of garbage allowed to litter what could be extraordinary pebble beaches, the smashing of the limestone coastline for finger mussels leaving large underwater empty moonscapes or the failure to release undersized fish, which can be seen daily in the local fish markets, leading to a reduction in fish stocks.

Above all, everyone must make the decision to live, die or navigate.